

**07/22/21 Thursday**

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US Unemployment Rising as States Gut Federal Assistance Plans, COVID Cases Grow  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

On Thursday, the US Department of Labor announced that weekly unemployment insurance claims had increased by 51,000 from the previous week, hitting a seasonally adjusted 419,000 new claims. The news comes as more than half of US states move to sunset the federal unemployment assistance program and COVID-19 cases rise.

"In the week ending July 17, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 419,000, an increase of 51,000 from the previous week's revised level," the DoL said in a [Thursday release](#), noting it had also revised the previous week's total upward by 8,000 claims. The four-week moving average was 385,250 claims per week, it noted, which was a slight increase of 750 from where it had been the week prior.

In addition to new claims, the release also notes that 12,573,833 people who had previously filed a claim filed another claim in the week ending in July 3, meaning long-term unemployment remains a major problem. However, it does note that during the same week in 2020, there were almost 33 million weekly claims.

Data from the DoL's Bureau of Labor [Statistics from June](#) shows that the workforce participation rate has "remained within a narrow range of 61.4 percent to 61.7 percent since June 2020," and that "the number of persons not in the labor force who currently want a job was 6.4 million," who aren't counted as unemployed or even as part of the workforce.

Together, the data shows that despite claims of an economic recovery, the dire job situation has remained unchanged since last summer, with millions still out of work.

The Thursday report notes that the insured unemployment rate was 2.4%, or 3,236,000 - the lowest it's been since the end of March 2020, when the first data from mass shutdowns came in. However, this could also be due to several states ending their federal unemployment assistance programs.

"The unexpected bump in claims could be noise in the system, but it's also not hard to see how the rise of the COVID-19 delta variant could add thousands of layoffs to numbers that already are double what they were pre-Covid," Robert Frick, a corporate economist at Navy Federal Credit Union, told the [Washington Post](#).

**States Gut Unemployment Plan**

Across the US, [26 states have](#) either terminated all three federal unemployment assistance programs early or outlined plans to do so. Many are the same states where [vaccinations are low](#) and officials have expressed their contempt for COVID-19 safety measures, including vaccinations.

The American Rescue Plan, passed in March, injected enough funding into the programs to last until September 6, but many Republican officials believe the programs are deterring unemployed people from seeking work.

"The disappointing jobs report makes it clear that paying people not to work is dampening what should be a stronger jobs market," Neil Bradley, executive vice president and chief policy officer at the US Chamber of Commerce pro-business lobby, [opined in May](#). "We need a comprehensive approach to dealing with our workforce issues and the very real threat unfilled positions pose to our economic recovery from the pandemic."

Rep. Kevin McCarthy, who leads Republicans in the US House of Representatives, similarly said on Twitter that by extending unemployment benefits, Democrats "have demonized work so Americans would become dependent on big government."

Together, state and federal unemployment programs can provide claimants with an average of \$618 a week, or roughly the equivalent to \$15 an hour at a full-time position, before taxes.

However, as the [Washington Post](#) noted, with many businesses continuing to hold their wages at or close to the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour and refusing to offer benefits like paid sick leave or vacation time, a movement for a \$15 an hour minimum wage having swelled over more than a decade, and service industry jobs like restaurant and grocery stores having borne the [brunt of pandemic deaths](#), many workers likely don't feel it's worth their time to put up with so much for so little.

#### New COVID Surge

Four US states saw outsized increases in jobless claims last week: Michigan, Kentucky, Texas, and Missouri, the latter two of which have already ended their federal unemployment programs. The states have also seen a major rise in COVID-19 cases in recent weeks, part of a larger nationwide trend that health officials say is being driven by low vaccination rates in what tend to be more rural and conservative states and regions of states.

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director [Rochelle Walensky warned](#) last week of a "pandemic of the unvaccinated," with 97% of new cases occurring in unvaccinated people. On July 21, [the CDC recorded](#) 55,000 new cases nationwide, more than five times what they were a month before. At the same time, 56% of the adult population has at least one dose, while 48% has both doses, signaling that the vaccination rate is leveling off.

"We expect the downward trend in continuing claims will gather momentum as top-off benefits end in all states in early September and other constraints on labor supply including lack of childcare recede," Nancy Vanden Houten, lead US economist at Oxford Economics in New York, [told Reuters](#).

"The latest surge in coronavirus cases may make some individuals more reluctant to return to work, however."

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Pfizer Partners With South Africa's Biovac to Make COVID-19 Vaccines for Africa in 2022  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

South African firm Biovac has struck a deal with Pfizer and BioNTech to produce their joint COVID-19 vaccine beginning in 2022. Pfizer and the South African government have been on



opposite sides of a debate over waiving IP protections for COVID-19 vaccines during the pandemic to ease mass vaccination in the Third World.

Pfizer said in a [Wednesday news release](#) it would begin producing its COVID-19 vaccine at a Biovac facility in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2022.

"To facilitate Biovac's involvement in the process, technical transfer, on-site development and equipment installation activities will begin immediately," the statement said. "At full operational capacity, the annual production will exceed 100 million finished doses annually. All doses will exclusively be distributed within the 55 member states that make up the African Union."

However, the chemicals used in the vaccine itself won't be produced in-country, they'll be shipped from elsewhere and assembled into the final vaccine for distribution in Cape Town - a process called "fill and finish."

"We are thrilled to collaborate with Pfizer and BioNTech to produce and distribute the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine within Africa. This is testament of the long-standing relationship we have had with Pfizer through the Prevenar 13 vaccine," which protects against pneumococcal pneumonia, Biovac CEO Dr. Morena Makhoana said in the release.

"This is a critical step forward in strengthening sustainable access to a vaccine in the fight against this tragic, worldwide pandemic. We believe this collaboration will create opportunity to more broadly distribute vaccine doses to people in harder-to-reach communities, especially those on the African continent," he added.

**'Not Enough' for Vaccine Independence**

Lara Dovifat of Médecins Sans Frontières told the [Associated Press](#) the deal was "a first step" but noted it was "clearly not enough to achieve vaccine independence on the African continent," since Pfizer and BioNTech have still not agreed to share enough of their technology to let South Africa make the vaccine independently.

South Africa and India have been at the [head of a movement](#) of more than 80 nations to convince the World Trade Organization to waive its Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement, which prevents generic versions of drugs from being made in the Third World, which would make them cheap enough for many poorer nations to afford. Instead, those nations or individuals must buy those drugs from First World pharmaceutical corporations that produce them, often at prices comparable to those faced by First World customers.

Pfizer in particular has become known for [squeezing its customers](#), forcing them to accept responsibility for lawsuits over side-effects of the drug and to offer up sovereign wealth assets like embassies and military bases as collateral against future legal cases.

In May, Pfizer Chairman and CEO Albert Bourla said in a first quarter [earnings statement](#) that the company expected to make \$26 billion from COVID-19 vaccine sales this year, which would only increase next year based on the assumption of "durable demand."

**Ramping Up Production**

"Vaccines are just trickling into Africa," South African President [Cyril Ramaphosa said](#) at a press conference with French President Emmanuel Macron in late May. "We cannot continue to wait at ... the back of the queue. The longer we wait, the more lives we put at risk."

South Africa has only vaccinated 5% of its population of 59 million, but across Africa, less than 2% of Africans have been vaccinated against the virus. Many nations receive shots donated by other countries via the COVAX program overseen by the World Health Organization, which

[sounded the alarm](#) last month that more than half of the nations it supports were in immediate risk of running out of shots.

South Africa was already largely relying on Pfizer for its vaccination program and has paid for 40 million doses. However, it has also been producing the Johnson & Johnson vaccine at an Aspen Pharmacare facility in Durban, but was [forced to discard](#) more than 300,000 J&J shots last month due to contamination fears stemming from manufacturing errors at another facility in the US city of Baltimore.

Their goal is to have two-thirds of the population vaccinated by February 2022.

On Tuesday, Will Stevens, the US Consul-General in Cape Town, [announced that Washington](#) would invest \$200 million into Aspen, Africa's largest pharmaceutical company, to allow production of the vaccine to double to 400 million annual shots. Unlike the two-shot Pfizer vaccine, the J&J vaccine is a single-shot treatment.

Earlier this month, Johannesburg also [certified China's Sinovac](#) vaccine, and according to the [Global Times](#), production of the shot in South Africa is also being considered. Egypt and Morocco have already signed deals to produce the vaccine from Sinopharm, another Chinese company.

The country is presently in the midst of a third wave of COVID-19 infections, which has brought new closures and shutdowns, including a temporary ban on buying alcohol. The massive unemployment and lack of access to goods has helped fan the flames of the massive protests and riots seen in the country over the last two weeks, initially provoked by the arrest of former South African President Jacob Zuma, in which at least 276 people have been killed.

On Thursday, Health Department Director General Nicholas Crisp told parliament that 25,000 vaccine doses had been stolen in the looting, which had also temporarily paralyzed the vaccination campaign. However, he said the campaign had resumed and that 250,000 people had been vaccinated in the last 24 hours.

"We will be able to have vaccinated - at least one dose - 35 million people before Christmas," Crisp said, according to the [South African Broadcasting](#) Corporation. A new [spike in COVID-19](#) infections has also been recorded in the wake of the upheaval.

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Pentagon Confirms Seven Colombians Arrested for Moise's Murder Trained at US Army's WHINSEC School  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Pentagon has revealed that seven of the Colombian ex-soldiers accused of helping kill Haitian President Jovenel Moise received training from the US while in Colombian military service, including at an elite US Army program whose alumni are infamous for carrying out coups across Latin America.

"Thus far, we've identified seven individuals who were former members of the Colombian military that had received some sort of ... U.S. funded and provided education and training," US Department of Defense spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.



The training included military leadership and professional development training, emergency medical training, helicopter maintenance, and seminars on counter-narcotics and counterterrorism tactics, according to an anonymous US official who spoke with [Voice of America](#).

Kirby stressed that they “got nothing certainly related, at all, or that one could extrapolate, as leading to or encouraging of what happened in Haiti.”

However, Pentagon officials told [Voice of America](#) that some also took courses at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) at Fort Benning, Georgia. The institute is better known by its former name, the US Army School of the Americas.

Washington has used the school for decades to give right-wing militia or military forces specialized training for fighting communist and socialist groups across Latin America, and graduates of the program [have been implicated](#) in some of the bloodiest civil wars and coups in the region, including in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Peru, Argentina and Colombia, the [generals who led](#) the 2009 coup against Honduran President Manuel Zelaya; many of the ringleaders of the 2019 [coup against Bolivian](#) President Evo Morales; and the genocide of Mayans in Guatemala.

“I know of no plans right now as a result of what happened in Haiti for us to reconsider or to change this very valuable, ethical leadership training that we continue to provide to partners in the Western Hemisphere and to partners around the world,” Kirby said on Thursday.

WHINSEC Commandant Colonel John Dee Suggs recently told VOA that the school had reformed and was “not shooting anybody. We’re not teaching anybody to ... go into a house and take these folks down.”

“We will only train people who have the same human rights values that we have, who have the same democratic values that we have,” Suggs told the US state-owned outlet. Another official added that all WHINSEC courses include human rights and ethics training.

However, the same claims have been made about other US military training programs as well, such as those performed by US Africa Command across Africa. [As Sputnik reported](#), troops trained by AFRICOM are responsible for seven successful coups d’etat on the continent in the 13 years since the command was formed.

In Haiti, police have arrested 18 Colombians and two Americans in connection with the July 7 murder of Moise and wounding of his wife, Martine, in their home outside Port-au-Prince. Police said as many as 28 had taken part in the commando raid, but the rest had been killed in shootouts with police. Colombian military officials have confirmed 17 of the Colombians are ex-military, having all left the service in the last couple of years.

The US has worked especially closely with Colombia since the early 20th century, training military and police to crush peasant uprisings and workers’ strikes like those by the US-owned United Fruit company in the 1920s and 30s, or the more recent communist insurgencies the US has claimed are also drivers of the drug trade. More recently, the US has used Colombia as a base from which to [infiltrate Venezuela](#), including American mercenaries like Silvercorp, which aimed to kidnap and extradite Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in May 2020.

Venezuelan National Assembly speaker [Jorge Rodriguez has noted](#) that CTU Security, the firm contracted to hire the hit squad that killed Moise, was also behind the 2018 assassination attempt on Maduro and was part of the 2020 operation with Silvercorp as well.

Gen. Eduardo Zapateiro, head of the Colombian Army, [told Reuters recently](#) that Colombian soldiers are often recruited as mercenaries after their obligatory service is completed “because of all their experience.”

“It’s a shame because we train them for other things,” he added.

However, that training has also been blamed for the [deadly police violence](#) used against protesters on Colombia's streets earlier this year, in which as many as 42 people may have been killed and hundreds wounded.

Of the two Americans arrested, [one formerly worked](#) with the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), a paramilitarized federal police agency that works extensively in Colombia. When the commando approached Moise’s house on the night of the murder, they introduced themselves [as DEA agents](#) on a raid to convince his guards to stand down.

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US, Iraq to Agree American Troop Withdrawal Should Be Complete by End of 2021 - Report by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Following the ongoing efforts to remove US forces from Afghanistan, chatter has begun to emerge regarding the potential pullout of American troops from nearby Iraq, which has endured the presence of US soldiers since the 2003 invasion to oust then Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Top US and Iraqi officials are expected to issue an announcement in the following days that will call for the removal of American soldiers from the war-torn nation by the end of 2021, it was revealed Thursday.

Citing knowledgeable officials, the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) that senior officials have come to the agreement that Iraq’s partnership with the US needs to shift away from a military presence and focus instead on increasing intelligence cooperation.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told the Journal that the Middle Eastern country does not “need any more fighters” since it already has a sufficient supply. “What do we need? We need cooperation in the field of intelligence,” he underscored.

Hussein further noted, “We need help with training. We need troops to help us in the air.”

The foreign minister’s remarks [largely echoed](#) those made by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who previously stated that while it’s time for US troops to head back stateside, Iraq would still need assistance in training, intelligence and air support.

Kadhimi had made the comments ahead of his looming in-person July meeting with US President Joe Biden, which is expected to touch on the continued cooperation between the two nations.

The latest comes after remarks issued by Kadhimi’s office and Brett McGurk, who serves as the special coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, [raised alarms](#) after mixed messages suggested that a pullout of US troops could happen sooner rather than later.



To date, the Biden administration has not provided a timeline on a possible troop withdrawal; however, it has been publicly acknowledged by both Iraqi and American officials that both parties are in agreement regarding an eventual withdrawal.

The US has maintained a troop presence in Iraq since March 2003, when tens of thousands of American forces were deployed as part of a larger effort to oust former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Although troops were momentarily withdrawn under the Obama administration, soldiers were eventually redeployed in 2014 with the emergence of the Daesh militant force. A renewed effort to remove US troops came after former US President Donald Trump ordered the January 2020 [assassination](#) of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force Commander, Major Gen. Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces Deputy Chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. The drone strike took place in Baghdad.

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US Would Have 'No Chance' at Stopping Chinese Strike on Taiwan, Military Expert Says  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Tensions between the US, China and Taiwan reached new levels under the Trump administration after Washington largely expanded its military support for the self-governing island. Since taking over the reins, the Biden White House has worked to avoid further escalations, all while maintaining its One-China policy.

Should the US ever seek to intervene in a Chinese military operation involving Taiwan, American officials would have zero chance of successfully preventing mainland forces from arriving on the island nation, a military expert recently claimed.

Du Wenlong, a military expert who serves as the director of the Chinese Military Culture Society, remarked during a Defense Review panel hosted on Chinese state broadcaster CCTV that US efforts to stall or shutter a potential Chinese military operation on the island would likely be in vain.

The official's commentary came as China has been holding a massive, six-day military exercise along its eastern coastline in the East China Sea. Operations have been held about 135 nautical miles north of Taiwan, a self-governing island that mainland China has long considered a wayward province.

Asked about the drills and whether a hypothetical military strike on Taiwan could be thwarted by American troops, Du indicated that Chinese troops could arrive on the island "in a very short amount of time," effectively giving US forces "no chance to intervene in a Taiwan Strait conflict." "Before US forces arrive, we will have completed all our combat tasks," he acknowledged.

"The current drills a short distance away [from Taiwan] could be considered a routine exercise, but I think they're specially targeted [at Taiwan]," Du continued. "Taiwan is the target." He further remarked that the exercises will serve as a "serious warning" to Taiwan, so long as it continues to participate in military engagements with the US.

Although the reports were [later denied](#) by the US Department of Defense, local Taiwanese outlets did indicate in [late 2020](#) that US Marines were in the midst of training troops on the island for the very first time since 1979.

In fact, the US has a history of concealing its troop deployments and the self-governing island is no different, especially after it was [revealed](#) in April 2019 that the US had been stationing forces at its de-facto embassy - the American Institute in Taiwan - for over 10 years.

The latest drills held by mainland China come as the US continues to conduct its freedom of navigation operations in the region, which have prompted repeated Chinese [warnings](#) about American vessels illegally trespassing in its waters.

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#### Royal Disinterest - Cartoons

American publisher Penguin Random House recently announced that it will be working with Prince Harry to publish an "intimate and heartfelt memoir" detailing his military service and life as a father and husband. However, amid the prince's decision to hightail it stateside, many Britons aren't exactly thrilled about the looming tell-all.

A [survey](#) conducted by YouGov has revealed that Prince Harry's forthcoming memoir won't be well-received by the British public, as two-thirds of polled Britons indicated they are "not interested at all" in the work.

Of the polled British public, approximately 67% said they had absolutely no desire to read the book. Only 14% stated that they would be willing to check out Prince Harry's own retelling of events.

In fact, many of the surveyed respondents (53%) indicated that it was "inappropriate" for the royal to publish the [memoir](#), with some 38% being of the belief that it would be "very inappropriate."

The survey, however, does suggest that the memoir could have more support among American audiences, especially considering at least 25% of Americans [polled](#) said they were either very or fairly interested.

The prince's memoir, which reportedly "[blindsided](#)" Buckingham Palace, is expected to hit bookshelves sometime in 2022.

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#### Ben & Jerry's Parent Company Remains 'Fully Committed' to Israel Despite Drama Over Sales Halt

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Tensions between Ben & Jerry's and Israel have remained at an all-time high as several Israeli officials have called on American counterparts to punish the Vermont-based firm over the



decision to halt sales in the “occupied Palestinian territory.” Although blame has been tossed to parent company Unilever, its CEO has rebuked the claim.

Unilever CEO Alan Jope has proclaimed that the multinational company remains “fully committed” to maintaining its business dealings in Israel, regardless of the decision made by its subsidiary Ben & Jerry’s to halt sales within “occupied Palestinian territory.”

Jope acknowledged the ongoing public feud between Ben & Jerry’s and Israel during a Thursday conference call with investors, recalling that when Unilever acquired the ice creamery in 2000, it did so knowing that the company would create an independent board to manage its social mission.

“Obviously it’s a complex and sensitive matter that elicits very strong feelings,” Jope told investors. “If there is one message I want to underscore in this call, it’s that Unilever remains fully committed to our business in Israel.”

Said business dealings include a \$41 million razor factory, as well as corporate offices and facilities that employ hundreds of individuals.

“It’s been a longstanding issue for Ben & Jerry’s,” the CEO continued, touching on the company’s controversial [Monday announcement](#) to halt sales in areas considered to be under Israeli occupation. “We were aware of this decision by the brand and its independent board, but it’s certainly not our intention that every quarter will have one quite as fiery as this one.”

Ben & Jerry’s announced it would be taking steps to end sales in areas it considers contested in the region, as it conflicted with the company’s “values.” The Vermont-based company has been operating across Israel since the late 1980s; however, it recently came under heavy criticism after it remained silent amid the heavy exchanges of fire between Israeli and Palestinian forces in May.

Incidentally, while Jope placed some distance between Unilever and Ben & Jerry’s announcement, reports indicated on Monday that it was in fact Unilever that made the executive decision to push out the statement.

At the time, the independent board that oversees the company’s social mission and Anuradha Mittal, who chairs the board, relayed to the public that the statement was not at all approved by the independent board. “[Unilever] are trying to destroy the soul of the company,” Mittal told NBC News in a statement.

US States Weigh Divesting From Ben & Jerry’s

Amid the overwhelming desire to punish Ben & Jerry’s over the sales halt, multiple Israeli officials have voiced their discontent over the matter and called on American officials to act out against the company.

With tensions high, even Gideon Erdan, who serves as the permanent Israeli ambassador to the UN, took things up a notch and sent out [multiple letters](#) to US governors to urge them to tap their state’s legislation against the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement to strike back at Ben & Jerry’s.

Among those states are Florida and Texas, where state officials have either begun talks on how to pull away from Ben & Jerry’s or launch full-out investigations into the sales decision.

Texas State Comptroller Glenn Hegar, who controls billions in assets for the Lone Star State’s public pension funds, announced on Thursday that he ordered a review to determine whether

the sales halt violated the state's anti-BDS law, which passed in 2017. If found guilty, the Lone Star State would be required to implement sanctions against the creamery giant. Meanwhile in Florida, state CFO Jimmy Patronis, who also oversees the Sunshine State's public pension funds, [told CNBC](#) that his office is in the midst of weighing its options. In fact, officials have already informed Ben & Jerry's that the company would be barred from renewing or starting any new contracts in the state if it's determined that it violated anti-BDS legislation. Sidestepping a direct remark on the Ben & Jerry's drama, the US State Department spokesperson Ned Price reiterated to reporters on Tuesday that the Land of the Free "firmly" opposes the BDS movement as it "unfairly singles out Israel."

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Pelosi 'Deadly Serious' About Going Forward With Jan. 6 Probe, Despite McCarthy's GOP Boycott Threat  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Wednesday, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) declared that he would rescind all five of his recommendations for the chamber's special committee tasked to probe the January 6 riot, unless House Speaker Nancy Pelosi moved to accept Reps. Jim Jordan (R-OH) and Jim Banks (R-IN). Pelosi cited probe integrity as the reason for her rejection. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told reporters on Thursday that legislation allowed her to block two of McCarthy's nominations for the special committee probing January 6, despite the minority leader threatening to withdraw all five of his nominations in response. Pelosi emphasized once more that she believes [Reps. Jordan and Banks would taint the "integrity"](#) of the Jan. 6 Commission, and their rejections from the group stand. "While this may be unprecedented, so was an attack on the Capitol," Pelosi said. The House speaker claimed she was "deadly serious" about her move, which was in opposition to those who urged her to approve the lawmakers. "Why should we waste time on something so predictable? The Republicans [McCarthy] puts on will have their own point of view," Pelosi said. "Nobody is saying that [there should be] all one point of view." The House speaker's decision means that all five recommendations will be withdrawn, per McCarthy's threat on Wednesday. "Unless Speaker Pelosi reverses course and seats all five Republican nominees, Republicans will not be party to their sham process and will instead pursue our own investigation of the facts," the minority leader said, branding Pelosi's move as "an egregious abuse of power." At the same time, Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) has been appointed to the 13-person committee by Pelosi, and reports have emerged suggesting Pelosi may appoint Rep. Adam Kinzinger, another anti-Trump, conservative values-driven Republican. Cheney and Kinzinger are both among the House Republicans who [voted in favor of the committee's formation](#).



Speaking to reporters on Wednesday, Cheney declared that she agreed with Pelosi's decision to reject her two Republican colleagues because McCarthy "has attempted to prevent the American people from understanding what happened -- to block this investigation."

McCarthy has panned the 13-member group as a "sham committee that's just politically driven by Speaker Pelosi."

The minority leader has also declared that the GOP is prepared to carry out their own investigation into the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. McCarthy and other Republicans have argued that the probe should focus on why the US Capitol was not properly secured on Jan. 6, despite reports claiming law enforcement had information leading up to the attack.

Presently, the group consists of Cheney and seven Democrats. Pelosi has said that she envisions having a "bipartisan quorum," but no further appointments have been announced.

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Photos: NASA InSight Reveals Mars' Crust, Mantle & Molten Core  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Interior Exploration using Seismic Investigations, Geodesy and Heat Transport (InSight) spacecraft of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) touched down on Mars back in November 2018 and, since 2019, has been recording hundreds of seismic tremors on the Red Planet - aptly named "marsquakes"

NASA, on Thursday, unveiled a collection of three studies in the peer-reviewed journal Science, detailing InSight data that helped scientists determine the depth and composition of Mars' crust, mantle and core - which was confirmed to be molten.

"When we first started putting together the concept of the mission more than a decade ago, the information in these papers is what we hoped to get at the end," said Bruce Banerdt, InSight's principal investigator at NASA's California-based Jet Propulsion Laboratory. "This represents the culmination of all the work and worry over the past decade."

InSight's seismometer, dubbed the Seismic Experiment for Interior Structure (SEIS), recorded 733 distinct marsquakes since 2019, and 35 of those were, according to the new data, were used for the three reports. Because seismic waves change based on the material they encounter, scientists are able to use these variations to determine the planet's inner structure. Simon Stähler, of Swiss university ETH Zurich and lead author of the paper on Mars' core, called the study a "once-in-a-lifetime chance."

"It took scientists hundreds of years to measure Earth's core; after the Apollo missions, it took them 40 years to measure the Moon's core. InSight took just two years to measure Mars' core," he added.

It is worth noting that Mars has no tectonic plates like that of Earth. Furthermore, none of the quakes registered above a 4.0 magnitude level.

"We'd still love to see the big one," said Mark Panning, lead author of the paper on Mars' crust. "We have to do lots of careful processing to pull the things we want from this data. Having a bigger event would make all of this easier."

Based on the data, experts have theorized that Mars formed from meteor material and space dust that formed together as it was orbiting the sun.

NASA scientists plan to use this data on Mars to further the modern understanding of how rocky planets, such as Earth, formed.

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Mississippi AG Urges US Supreme Court to Overturn Roe v. Wade  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Roe v. Wade was a landmark decision handed down by the United States Supreme Court in 1973, establishing that the US Constitution safeguards a pregnant woman's right to have an abortion. The historic ruling triggered national debate regarding term limits for abortions, particularly in states that had anti-abortion legislation struck down.

In court documents filed on Thursday, Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch (R) urged the Supreme Court to overturn the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling and allow Mississippi's attempt to ban virtually all abortions after the 15-week mark.

"The conclusion that abortion is a constitutional right has no basis in text, structure, history, or tradition," Fitch [wrote in the brief](#).

The Mississippi AG argued that the SCOTUS decision in both Roe v. Wade and Planned Parenthood v. Casey, a 1992 decision that upheld a woman's constitutional right to an abortion, "are egregiously wrong" because "they have been hopelessly unworkable."

"Nothing but a full break from those cases can stem the harms they have caused," Fitch asserted.

Mississippi's anti-abortion legislation was passed in 2018, and calls for a ban on abortions after 15 weeks, with few restrictions following that period. An appeals court then ruled in 2019 that the state law violated "an unbroken line dating to Roe v. Wade" which traditionally upheld "a woman's right to choose an abortion before viability."

"On a sound understanding of the Constitution, the answer to the question presented in this case is clear and the path to that answer is straight," the AG claimed in the filing. "Under the Constitution, may a State prohibit elective abortions before viability? Yes. Why? Because nothing in constitutional text, structure, history, or tradition supports a right to abortion."

Many pro-abortion groups have pushed back against the Mississippi AG's move.

"Mississippi has stunningly asked the Supreme Court to overturn Roe and every other abortion rights decision in the last five decades," said Nancy Northup, president and CEO of the Center for Reproductive Rights. "Today's brief reveals the extreme and regressive strategy, not just of this law, but of the avalanche of abortion bans and restrictions that are being passed across the country."



The matter is set to be reviewed by the SCOTUS during its upcoming term, which begins in October.

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#### EMA Approves Use of Moderna's COVID-19 Vaccine for Children Aged 12-17

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The European Medicines Agency (EMA) on Friday approved the use of Spikevax, a COVID-19 vaccine developed by US drugmaker Moderna, for children aged 12 to 17 years old.

"EMA's human medicines committee (CHMP) has recommended granting an extension of indication for the COVID-19 vaccine Spikevax (previously COVID-19 Vaccine Moderna) to include use in children aged 12 to 17 years. The vaccine is already authorised for use in people aged 18 and above. The use of the Spikevax vaccine in children from 12 to 17 years of age will be the same as in people aged 18 and above. It is given as two injections in the muscles of the upper arm, four weeks apart," EMA said in a statement.

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#### Lithuania Plans to Construct Container Towns for 40,000 Illegal Migrants - Border Service

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Lithuania intends to construct container towns for 40,000 illegal migrants near the border with Belarus, Rustamas Liubajevs, the State Border Guard Service commander, said.

"It is difficult to predict the situation on the border. We do not know how many houses we will need... We must be ready for any developments. The worst scenario — 40,000 migrants," Liubajevs told Lithuanian news portal Delfi.

According to the Svencionys District authorities, 16 hectares (around 40 acres) of land in the village of Augustavas were allocated for the container town's construction.

Currently, 484 illegal migrants are accommodated in a center for the registration of foreigners in the Svencionys District, as the news outlet reported.

The country also plans to set up another settlement for migrants, in the village of Medininkai in the Vilnius District, by August 5, and plans to buy up to 10,000 container houses for this, Vidas Macaitis, the deputy State Border Guard Service commander, said.

On July 2, Lithuania declared an emergency over the influx of illegal migrants from Belarus, many of them Iraqis, Iranians and Syrians. Lithuanian politicians and several leading EU officials have accused the Belarusian government of facilitating the movement of migrants across the border with Lithuania as retaliation for the European Union's decision to impose political and economic sanctions on Minsk. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said that his country

would not contain the flow of illegal migrants to the EU, as it does not have enough capacity due to the sanctions imposed on Minsk.

According to the last data, since the beginning of the year, Lithuania detained over 2,400 illegal migrants on the border with Belarus — 30 times more than in 2020.

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US, Polish Officials Discuss 'Shared Concerns' Over Nord Stream 2 – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 22 (Sputnik) – US State Department Counselor Derek Chollet during a visit to Warsaw met with Polish officials to discuss mutual concerns over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, the State Department said in a statement on Friday.

"Counselor of the Department Derek Chollet traveled to Warsaw to reaffirm the strong relationship the United States has with our NATO Ally Poland," the statement said. "He discussed shared concerns about the Nord Stream 2 pipeline."

During the visit, Chollet met with Deputy Foreign Minister Marcin Przydacz, Secretary of State for Strategic Energy Infrastructure Piotr Naimski, and Senator Tomasz Grodzki for talks aimed at "enhancing Polish and regional energy security" and tackling the threat of climate change, the statement said.

The US official "also expressed appreciation for Poland's role in countering Russian aggression and promoting democracy in Belarus," the statement added.

Chollet's visit to Warsaw comes on the heels of a newly announced compromise deal between the US and Germany over the Nord Stream 2 energy project, which Washington has long opposed. On Wednesday, two nations agreed to allow the project to proceed without the threat of US sanctions.

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Peruvian President-Elect Wants to Launch Local Production of Sputnik V - Advisor

LIMA, July 22 (Sputnik) - Peruvian President-elect Pedro Castillo would like to begin domestic production of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, his healthcare adviser, Hernando Cevallos, told Sputnik.

Peru signed a deal on Tuesday to purchase 20 million doses of Sputnik V. The country is currently using Pfizer, Sinopharm and AstraZeneca shots in its vaccination campaign. Nearly 11 million out of 33 million Peruvians have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, with 4 million fully vaccinated.

"Castillo has already stated that we aspire to produce the vaccine in the country. We need biotechnology support to be able to develop it, but the interest is solid. In addition, we do not know how long the pandemic will last, how many waves will come, whether viral mutations will



occur. As part of efforts to improve expertise, vaccine production comes first," Hernando Cevallos said in an interview.

Apart from vaccines, the new government of Peru intends to develop wider healthcare cooperation with Russia, the official noted. He admitted that there are many problems in the Peruvian health sector, which lacks the necessary level of technology and equipment.

"This is not an easy path, but we must sit down and talk with all the countries that can help us, without any ideological distinction, because health is linked to a dignified life and is a human right," Cevallos added, when asked about the new cabinet's plans for cooperation with Russia.

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#### UNHCR Salutes Participation of Refugee Olympic Team in Tokyo Games

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) on Friday praised the special significance that the participation of a refugee team brings to the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games.

"The @RefugeesOlympic Team is ready to compete at the #Tokyo2020 Olympics. These 29 athletes are proof of the power of sport to bring hope, heal and help refugees rebuild their future. Support the team and #CheerForRefugees," the UNHCR said on Twitter.

This is the second time that a refugee team will compete after their debut at the Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 with a team of ten members.

The 2020 Refugee Olympic Team includes members from Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Eritrea, Venezuela, Iran, Afghanistan, Cameroon, Iran, Sudan, and Congo. They will be performing in twelve sports, including athletics, badminton, boxing, canoeing, cycling, judo, karate, taekwondo, shooting sport, swimming, weightlifting, and wrestling.

In 2015, the number of forcibly displaced people around the world surpassed 65 million. Of this number, over 1 million people found refuge in Europe after fleeing wars in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia.

In summer of 2015, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) established the Refugee Emergency Fund, totaling \$1.9 million, to help international aid agencies integrate refugees in sport. In addition, the IOC announced it would be inviting refugee athletes to compete in the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

The Tokyo Olympics, originally scheduled to take place in 2020, were postponed for a year due to the pandemic. The event is scheduled to take place from July 23 to August 8, with harsh restrictions in place to ensure safety.

The Refugee Paralympic Team is expected to make its debut appearance in Tokyo.

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Some Olympic Athletes Skipped Daily COVID-19 Tests Over Shortages of Kits - Reports

TOKYO, July 22 (Sputnik) - Some foreign athletes living in the Olympic Village in Tokyo have been unable to undergo daily PCR testing for coronavirus as required due to a shortage of testing kits, the NHK broadcaster reported on Friday, citing sources familiar with the matter. Under the rules aimed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, Olympic athletes are required to undergo COVID-19 testing on a daily basis. At the beginning of the week, several national Olympic committees reported to the organizers the lack of testing kits, the sources said. In particular, those athletes who did not receive their tests on July 19, were offered to take tests twice the next day.

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#### Talks on Supply of Ka-226T Helicopters Stall Over India's Location Demands - Official

ZHUKOVSKY, Russia, July 22 (Sputnik) - The negotiations on the supply and launch of licensed production of Ka-226T multirole helicopters in India have dragged on due to the latter's requirements on the degree of domestic production, Dmitry Shugayev, director of Russia's Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (FSVTS), told Sputnik on Friday.

"Negotiations are currently underway between the joint venture and the Ministry of Defense of India on the technical part of the proposals. We are awaiting a decision on holding commercial negotiations. The delay in signing the contract for the supply of the Ka-226T is related to the issue of the level of domestic production," Shugayev said during the MAKS-2021 air show.

The official hopes that updated proposals prepared by the shareholders of the joint venture will satisfy the Indian defense ministry, paving the way for talks on the contract.

The talks on the supply and site of production of 200 Ka-226Ts in India have been underway since 2015. Moscow is expected to supply New Delhi 60 helicopters, and 140 others are set to be assembled in India.

The process has also been delayed due to the need to streamline certain local production issues in India in developing such "advanced and complex hardware," according to the FSVTS. Earlier this year, Alexander Mikheev, chief of Russia's state arms exporter Rosoboronexport, said that Russia and India had agreed on the design and degree of domestic production of the Ka-226T. The sides had yet to negotiate the cost of the vehicles and the schedule of their delivery at the time.

The MAKS-2021 international aviation and space show is taking place in the Moscow region from July 20-25. The Sputnik news agency is an official media partner of the event.

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#### Total of 36 People Killed in Landslides in India's Maharashtra - Local Administration



NEW DELHI, July 22 (Sputnik) - As many as 36 people were killed in three landslides in the Raigad region in India's western state of Maharashtra, local administration told Sputnik on Friday.

"Thirty-six people lost their lives in three landslides in the Raigad region of Maharashtra," the administration said.

Over the past days a heavy rainfall caused flooding in the region and affected both road and rail traffic. According to media reports, over 30 more people may be trapped under the debris.

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#### **US Envoy to UN Leads Delegation to Haiti for Moise Funeral - White House**

WASHINGTON, July 22 (Sputnik) – US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield is leading a six-person delegation to Haiti to attend the funeral of assassinated former President Jovenel Moise, President Joe Biden announced on Friday. "President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. today announced the designation of a Presidential Delegation to the Republic of Haiti to pay respects upon the death of His Excellency Jovenel Moise, Former President of the Republic of Haiti," the White House said in a press release. "The Honorable Linda Thomas-Greenfield, United States Ambassador to the United Nations, will lead the delegation."

The delegation will include Biden's top adviser for Latin America, Senior Director for the Western Hemisphere Juan Gonzales, as well as newly appointed US Special Envoy to Haiti Daniel Foote. US Ambassador to Haiti Michele Sison and Congressmen Gregory Meeks and Jeff Fortenberry will also attend the funeral.

Moise was shot dead at his residence on July 7. His wife, Martine, was wounded and airlifted to a US hospital. Haitian police have identified 28 suspects in the assassination, and 26 of them have been detained, including 18 Colombians, five Haitians and three US citizens. The Pentagon has confirmed that seven of the Colombians had received US military training.

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Russia's Central Bank to Bring Key Rate to 5-6% Neutral Range When Inflation Slows Down  
MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The Central Bank of Russia will bring the key rate back to the neutral range of 5-6% when inflation slows down, Elvira Nabiullina, the head of the bank, said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the bank raised the key rate for the fourth time in a row, this time by 1 percentage point to 6.5% per annum.

"According to our revised forecast, next year the average key rate will reach between 6 and 7% per annum. In the future, as inflation expectations decrease and inflation slows down, the rate

will return to its long-term neutral range, which we continue to estimate at 5-6%," Nabiullina said at a briefing.

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#### Protest Against Olympic Games Ongoing in Tokyo Near Stadium During Opening Ceremony

TOKYO, July 22 (Sputnik) - A protest against holding Olympic Games is ongoing in Tokyo near a stadium during an opening ceremony of the event on Friday.

Protesters who demand to spend money on COVID-19 response instead of the Olympics can be heard from inside the stadium.

Large-scale demonstrations are also underway in downtown Tokyo.

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#### Australian Regulator Grants Provisional Approval to Pfizer Vaccine for Minors Aged 12-16

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Australia's drug regulator on Friday pre-approved the Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine for use in individuals aged 12 years and older.

The decision comes as the authorities are facing a public outcry over recently tightened COVID-19 restrictions in several areas, brought on by local coronavirus outbreaks linked to the Delta variant, as well as a slow pace of vaccination.

"The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has provisionally approved the use of the Pfizer BNT162b2 COVID-19 vaccine (COMIRNATY) in individuals 12 years and older. Previously, the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine was provisionally approved for use in individuals 16 years or older," the TGA said in a press release.

Canada approved the vaccine for the age group in early May, becoming the first country to do so. The European Union, the United States, and a number of other nations has since followed suit.

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#### Moldova, Romania to Resume Cooperation at Intergovernmental Level – President Sandu

CHISINAU, July 22 (Sputnik) – Moldova and Romania will resume cooperation initiatives at the intergovernmental level in various areas, Moldovan President Maia Sandu said on Friday, following the victory of her party at the parliamentary elections, finally allowing her to form a cabinet.



Earlier in the day, Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu arrived in Chisinau for a one-day working visit, aimed at confirming the readiness of his country to boost cooperation with Sandu's pro-EU Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), which scored a landslide victory in election on July 11, and future government, a subject of Sandu's aspirations after she dissolved the country's parliament in April for its failure to approve a new cabinet.

"We discussed the results of the early parliamentary elections and the bilateral agenda of Bucharest and Chisinau. We also discussed the resumption of cooperation at the intergovernmental level, we are updating cooperation programs linked to the development of the economy, energy, healthcare, infrastructure, and many others," Sandu said at a briefing. She thanked Bucharest for efforts to help Moldova curb the pandemic, recalling that another batch of 100,000 doses of Pfizer vaccine will be delivered to the country from Romania on Friday as additional assistance.

Aurescu, for his part, outlined Bucharest's readiness to support the development of Moldova within the framework of European integration, voicing his hope for the creation of a new Moldovan cabinet as soon as possible.

The PAS won the snap parliamentary elections with 52.8% of the vote, which is enough to form a government single-handedly. Its main rival, the pro-Russian Communists and Socialists' bloc, led by former President Igor Dodon, came second with 27.17% of the ballots.

The results were recognized by the central election commission on July 19, and by the Constitutional Court on Friday.

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#### UK Competition Regulator Urges Gov't to Boost Development of Electric Vehicle Chargepoints

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) said on Friday that it had prepared a package of recommendations for the government to develop the network of electric vehicle chargepoints to increase availability in underserved areas ahead of the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars in 2030.

"Our recommendations will promote strong competition, encourage more investment, and build people's trust, both now and in the future. The CMA has also opened a competition law investigation into EV [electric vehicles] charging along motorways and will continue to work with government and the industry to help ensure electric vehicle charging is a success," Andrea Coscelli, the CMA chief, said.

According to the CMA, although the United Kingdom has currently 25,000 chargepoints, by 2030, the country needs to increase this number 10 times to meet demand. The authority pointed at the disproportional number of charging stations in London and the rest of the country, calling access to them a "postcode lottery." Therefore, it urges the governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to support local authorities in boosting the rollout of chargepoints in regions and rural areas.

The CMA also opened an investigation into the market dominance of the Electric Highway, the company providing 80% of all chargepoints at highway service stations as well as its long-term arrangements to cover about two-thirds of motorway stations.

The development of the electric vehicles system is an important part of the UK plan to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced in November that by 2030 the country will forbid the sale of new petrol and diesel cars.

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#### UNHCR Chief Meets Japanese Foreign Minister, Lauds Japan's Humanitarian Support

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi on Friday met with the Japanese foreign minister, Toshimitsu Motegi, and applauded the Asian country's support to refugees from Afghanistan, Africa, Latin America, Middle East, and Myanmar.

"Japan's humanitarian support to refugees from Myanmar and Afghanistan, as well as in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, is important and appreciated. It must be upheld and strengthened. I discussed these issues in a cordial meeting today with Foreign Minister @moteging," Grandi wrote in message posted on Twitter.

An estimated 31,600 refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless people have been either recognized or protected by Japan from 2010 to 2019.

Presently, Japan ranks as the 4th largest government donor and 4th largest global private donation contributor to the UN Refugee Agency in 2021.

Japan was initially criticized for the long-term detention of asylum seekers under its Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act. However, in February, the Japanese government said it would revise the legislation.

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#### Twitter Stock See Over 5% Rise in US After Strong Quarterly Earnings Report

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Shares of US microblogging company Twitter jumped by more than 5% at pre-market trading sessions on Friday, after the firm revealed strong financial results for its second quarter of this year.

As of 08:26 GMT, shares of the social networking giant were increasing by 5.4% to \$73.29 per share.

Twitter reported on Thursday nearly \$134 million in earnings, 20 cents per share, topping analysts' estimates of 7 cents per share. Twitter's revenue jumped 74% year-on-year in the second quarter, marking its fastest growth since 2014.

At close of Thursday trading, Twitter stock increased by 0.04% to \$69.57.



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**EU Receives Kiev's Request for Consultations on US-German Nord Stream 2 Agreement**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The European Union has received a request from the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry to hold consultations on the Nord Stream 2 agreement between the United States and Germany, EU Spokeswoman for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Nabila Massrali said on Friday.

"We do confirm receipt of the non-verbal from the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which our partners requested consultations referring to Articles 274 and 378 of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. The articles evoked refer to cooperation on infrastructure under the trade related energy chapter of the DCFTA title and to energy cooperation under the title of economic and sectoral cooperation," Massrali told a press briefing.

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**Two Warships of Iranian Navy to Take Part in Naval Parade in St. Petersburg - Source**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Two vessels of the Iranian navy, including Sahand destroyer, will take part in the Main Naval Parade in Russia's St. Petersburg on Sunday, a source in the Iranian embassy in Moscow confirmed to Sputnik.

"I confirm the information, Iranian destroyer Sahand will take part in the parade ... The second vessel, Makran, will join it," the source said.

The Main Naval Parade fleet review will be held in St. Petersburg on July 25, the Day of the Russian Navy. Over 50 warships, submarines, ships and boats of various classes, around 50 aircraft of the naval aviation, and over 4,000 servicemen are expected to participate in the parade.

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**Russian Central Bank Raises Key Rate to 6.5%**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The Russian Central Bank raised the key rate on one percentage point to 6.5% on Friday after a meeting of the board of directors.

The rate returned to the level of October-December 2019. The decision of the Central Bank has become the most 'hawkish' since December 2014, when the regulator urgently raised the rate by 6.5 percentage points to 17% per annum.

"On 23 July 2021, the Bank of Russia Board of Directors decided to increase the key rate by 100 b.p., to 6.50% per annum. According to the Bank of Russia's estimates, the Russian economy reached its pre-pandemic level in 2021 Q2," the regulator said in a statement.

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**UPDATE - UK Exempts Food Supply Staff From COVID Quarantine to Avoid Shortages Over 'Pandemic'**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The UK government exempts food production and supply sector workers from coronavirus-related quarantine in a bid to avoid food shortages as the so-called pingdemic puts pressure on the sector, the Department of Health and Social Care said. The move comes after the official health app told hundreds of thousands of workers to isolate following contact with someone with COVID-19, causing disruptions and prompting people to panic-buy. A record 618,903 people in England and Wales were "pinged" by the NHS COVID-19 app in the week to July 14, the official data said.

The UK health department revealed late on Thursday a list of 16 sectors, including food production and supply, where workers regardless of vaccination status will not have to self-isolate after coming into close contact with a COVID patient. They will be allowed to take daily tests at work instead.

The list also includes such sectors, as energy, civil nuclear, digital infrastructure, waste, water, veterinary medicines, essential chemicals, essential transport, medicines, medical devices, clinical consumable supplies, emergency services, border control, essential defense outputs, and local government.

The Times reported on Friday that the new rule will apply to workers in 2,000 warehouses and supermarket distribution centers, with up to 10,000 staff expected to qualify for the scheme. Helen Dickinson, chief executive of the British Retail Consortium, welcomed the government's "rapid response to this unfolding pingdemic," which has impacted shops and distributions centers.

"Retailers are working closely with Government to identify hundreds of key distribution sites that will benefit from the new daily contact testing scheme. It is absolutely vital that Government makes up for lost time and rolls out this new scheme as fast as possible," Dickinson said in a statement e-mailed to Sputnik by the consortium's press office.

She said that although disruption is limited at the moment, and retailers are monitoring the situation closely, the government will need to continue to listen to the concerns of the retail industry in the coming days and must be prepared to take further action if necessary.

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**US Reports 1st Cases of Pan-Resistant Fungus Candida Auris**



WASHINGTON, July 22 (Sputnik) - The first-ever cases of a potentially deadly fungus resistant to all drugs, called *Candida auris*, have been reported in care facilities in Texas and Washington, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Friday.

"Since January 2021 ... the Antibiotic Resistance Laboratory Network has detected independent clusters of pan-resistant or echinocandin-resistant cases in Texas and the District of Columbia (DC). Each cluster involved common health care encounters and no known previous echinocandin exposure, suggesting transmission of pan- and echinocandin-resistant strains for the first time in the United States," the CDC said in its Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. The CDC has reported a total of 101 clinical and screening cases from January to April in Washington, including three pan-resistant isolates at one long-term care facility for severely ill patients. Twenty-two cases were detected in patients at medical institutions in Texas during the same period.

"No known epidemiologic links were identified between the Texas and DC clusters. No patients with pan- or echinocandin-resistant isolates in either cluster had received echinocandins before *C. auris* specimen collection. Thirty-day mortality in both outbreaks combined was 30%, but the relative contribution of *C. auris* was unclear," the report added.

The regulator noted there were no data on the most appropriate therapy for pan-resistant infections.

The fungus, first reported in Japan in 2009, is thought to live on the skin and inside the body, prompting immune system complications for those already in poor health. It has since caused outbreaks in hospitals in India, the UK, as well as in parts of Latin America, where it has displayed resistance to anti-fungal agents.

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**Total of 35Mln Russians Got First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine - Health Minister**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - As many as 35 million Russians have already received the first dose of a coronavirus vaccine, with the number of those vaccinated surging by over 2 million in the past week, Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said on Friday.

"As of now, the number of those who have received the first component of a vaccine nears 35 million," Murashko said at a meeting of the coronavirus response coordination council. In the past week, the number of those vaccinated against COVID-19 increased by over 2 million, according to the minister.

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**Poll Shows 58% of Russians Positively Assess Putin's Job Performance**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Fifty-eight percent of respondents in Russia positively assess the work of President Vladimir Putin, according to a survey released by Moscow-based polling organization Public Opinion Foundation on Friday.

The poll said that meanwhile, 26% of Russians were negative about Putin's job performance, and 16% were unsure. In addition, 54% of respondents said that they trust the president, while 35% expressed the opposite opinion, and 11% found it difficult to answer.

The survey also showed that 31% of respondents would vote for the ruling United Russia party at the parliamentary elections that will take place in September, 12% said they would support the Communist Party, while 11% and 7% - the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and A Just Russia — Patriots — For Truth Party, respectively. However, 12% of respondents said that they would not take part in the elections, and 1% would spoil their ballots.

The poll was conducted from July 16-18 in 73 Russian regions among 3,000 respondents aged over 18. The margin of error does not exceed 2.5 percent.

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Tokyo Records 1,359 New COVID-19 Cases As Olympics Games Kick Off - Reports

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Tokyo metropolitan government recorded 1,359 daily coronavirus cases on Friday, the Japanese Kyodo news reported, amid public concern about surging infections in the capital city where the opening ceremony of the Olympics Games will be held later in the day.

The hosting city is currently under the fourth state of emergency declared on July 12 due to a steady rise in positive COVID-19 cases in previous weeks. The state of emergency will be in place until August 22, covering the entire duration of the Olympic Games.

The opening ceremony of the Tokyo Olympics is slated to be held on Friday evening, with a maximum of 950 guests expected to attend the event.

As part of its COVID-19 measures, the Olympics committee had banned spectators from most of the events during the global events.

Presently, the total number of COVID-19 cases directly linked to the Games stood at 106 on Friday, with 11 of them being athletes.

The Tokyo Olympics, originally scheduled to take place in 2020, was postponed for a year due to the outbreak of the pandemic. The event is set to take place from July 23 to August 8, with harsh restrictions put in place to ensure safety.

The Olympic Games will gather an estimated 19,000 athletes and 41,000 accompanying persons. Spectators not exceeding 50% of available seats and 10,000 people per stadium will only be allowed in the prefectures of Fukushima, Ibaraki, Miyagi, and Shizuoka.

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## International Observers May Be Used to Exert Influence on Russian Elections - Lavrov

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Friday said he would not rule out there will be attempts to influence the upcoming parliamentary elections via international observers.

"Of course, there will be attempts to exert direct impact through election observers from the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe], the Council of Europe," Lavrov said during an online conference hosted by the ruling United Russia party.

OSCE rules spell out neither the terms for inviting election observers nor their number, the minister noted, adding however that Russia will continue to invite them in line with its commitments.

The Russian legislative elections will take place from September 17-19.

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## REVIEW - US Benefit Asset Limits Trap Many Disabled Citizens in Poverty by Disincentivizing Work

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik), Jonathan Rowson - Disabled US citizens and advocates supporting their rights have, in their comments to Sputnik, urged Congress to take action to raise the amount of money people with disabilities are allowed to save, as the low asset limits attached to vital benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are detrimental to their quality of life.

The SSI program was launched in the 1970s as a means-tested initiative that allowed disabled people to apply for benefit payments.

At that time, the government judged that an individual with \$2,000 or more in savings, or \$3,000 if they are in a couple, would be disqualified from receiving SSI.

This threshold limit has not been raised at all over the past five decades, despite the extreme increase in the cost of living in the United States over this time.

As a result, disabled citizens, and the advocacy groups that represent them, have called on lawmakers to take action to ensure that those with disabilities are able to work, save, or receive lump sums from their relatives, without putting their SSI eligibility at risk.

### CURRENT RULES DISCOURAGE DISABLED CITIZENS FROM WORKING

Approximately 8 million people in the United States currently receive up to \$794 per month in SSI benefits. This figure is significantly below the federal poverty line, which is estimated at \$1,073 in income per month.

An individual becomes immediately ineligible for all SSI benefits if their assets exceed the \$2,000 threshold by just a single dollar, Cheryl Bates-Harris, the senior disability advocacy specialist at the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN), told Sputnik.

"If they have \$2,001 in the bank, they're considered no longer needy and they would be deemed ineligible for the benefit payments until such time as they spend down and demonstrate to Social Security that they no longer have the \$2,000," she said.

Robert Kingett, an author and a journalist who is a claimant of SSI, told Sputnik that the \$2,000 asset limit hindered his and his family's ability to save for vital purchases such as adaptive equipment.

"All of the asset rules have impacted me greatly, especially the \$2,000 limitation because I am totally blind, and I have cerebral palsy. Ever since I was little, we couldn't save up for expenses, or even just to buy adaptive equipment I'd need to meaningfully participate in society as a hard-working individual ... I wish people would understand that it's not just about having money. It's about having security," Kingett said, adding that the rules were also preventing him from marrying.

Kingett said that he had turned down a number of jobs over fears that by earning, he would lose his SSI benefits, noting that the process to reapply for the payments, once he would be eligible, was lengthy and could put him on the brink of poverty.

"I was getting asked to be a full-time accessibility consultant for a number of AAA game companies and they were willing to pay me professional rates for my skills and expertise. I had to turn all of them down because I'd lose all my benefits, without an easy path to get on them again if I left that job or similar" he remarked.

Cheryl Bates-Harris of the NDRN said that the current SSI threshold rules were a disincentive for disabled people to work, adding that parents would often prevent children with disabilities from participating in society or getting a job over fears that they could lose their benefits.

"I continue to hear all the time that parents particularly discourage children or young adults or even older adults from working because they are terrified that if they go over the threshold limit, that they're going to lose those benefits and that it's going to be difficult and convoluted for them to get back onto the benefits. So, many parents would just prefer that their children do nothing, spend time in day-wasting activities, rather than working, contributing to society, and as far as I'm concerned, improving the quality of their lives," she said.

Gary Nosacek, whose son is a claimant of SSI, told Sputnik of the difficulties he faced in battling the government to ensure that his son was able to stay eligible for the vital benefit.

"If you make too much, or if you try to save to get a place of your own, they cut your benefits. He tried to go to school three times and tried to hold a job three times. Each time he was getting the letters from SSI. Luckily for him, I took them and fought with them. I don't know how anyone without an advocate can survive the stress," Nosacek said.

The US government launched ABLE accounts six years ago, offering disabled citizens a state-run savings program that allows them to put money away while also claiming their SSI benefits.

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) closely monitors the accounts to ensure that funds, up to a maximum of \$100,000, are used for disability-related expenses.

Kingett, who said that he holds an ABLE account, said that the service is poorly advertised by the government and disability-related services in the United States.

"ABLE accounts help but they are not a perfect solution. For example, to first get an ABLE account, you first have to know it exists and what it does. There isn't a lot of robust information about it out there, and, even worse, is that disabled people are terrified to get one because they didn't want to get another account just to remember a bunch of restrictive clauses," he remarked.



Additionally, the journalist and author said that many of the banks that offer ABLE accounts have major accessibility issues on their websites and cellphone applications, making it difficult for disabled citizens to use them.

#### LEGISLATION PROPOSED TO UP THRESHOLD LIMITS

The growing economic problems faced by disabled people in the United States have prompted lawmakers in the House and Senate to introduce legislation that would increase the savings threshold to \$20,000 for individuals and \$30,000 for couples.

Three Democrat congresspeople – Jan Schakowsky, Raul Grijalva, and Elissa Slotkin – introduced the bill, which also proposes raising SSI payments to 100% of the federal poverty level, in early June. A similar bill was introduced by a group of senators, including Bernie Sanders, one week later.

Kingett said that he supported the proposed measures, although added that much more could be done to improve the economic lives of disabled people.

"They could make the ABLE program available regardless of bank. They could allow couples their full SSI benefit, totaling twice the individual rate, rather than a reduced marriage penalty. Allow disabled people to receive more income from a wider array of sources without a penalty in benefits. Nobody should be penalized for living in a household with others with the in-kind support and maintenance provision," he said, adding that SSI payments should be increased to 200% of the federal poverty level to ensure that disabled citizens do not live below the poverty line.

Cheryl Bates-Harris of the NDRN said that she backed the measures outlined in the new legislation, but said that the likelihood of it passing Congress was very slim.

"There is constantly legislation proposed about increasing the asset limit and rarely does it go even beyond committee," Bates-Harris remarked.

Taking steps to raise the incomes of disabled people, and ensuring that they are able to put money away for major purchases such as a college education, would lead to significant improvements in their quality of life, Bates-Harris said.

Commenting on the Senate bill, senator Bernie Sanders said that the current asset and income restrictions on SSI eligibility were "oppressive," adding that they "force those with disabilities to spend their lives in poverty."

An estimated 26% of citizens with disabilities in the United States aged 18-64 lived in poverty in 2019, compared to roughly 11% of citizens without disabilities.

President Joe Biden on July 9 fired Andrew Saul, a Trump appointee, from his position as the head of the Social Security Administration.

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#### Indian State of Kerala Seeks to Start Local Production of Russia's Sputnik V Vaccine

MOSCOW, July 23 (Sputnik) - The Indian state of Kerala intends to sign an agreement with Russia to set up a local plant for manufacturing the Sputnik V vaccine, P Rajeev, the Kerala state industry minister, said.

"Talks began long back when there was a severe shortage of vaccines. Preliminary discussions are underway and terms and conditions are being discussed between both sides. Chief secretary and industries officials are in discussion with Russian officials, counsel general and [the Russian] direct investment board [fund]. Letter of intent (LOI) to be signed within 3 days," the minister was quoted by India Today portal as saying on Thursday.

The authorities already allocated 10 acres of land in Thonakkal Life Science Park near the city of Thiruvananthapuram for a possible factory, the minister said.

India approved the Sputnik V vaccine in April. The Russian Direct Investment Fund, which is responsible for marketing the vaccine overseas, already struck deals with a number of Indian pharmaceutical manufacturers, including Serum Institute of India, Gland Pharma, Hetero Biopharma, Panacea Biotec, Stelis Biopharma, Virchow Biotech and Morepen for localizing Sputnik V's production in the South Asian country.

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#### Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei Gets 2nd Dose of Domestic COVID-19 Vaccine

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said on Friday that he had received the second dose of the COVIran homegrown coronavirus vaccine.

The first dose was administered to the supreme leader on June 25.

"Today, Friday the 23rd of July, receiving the second dose of the Iranian COVID-19 vaccine," Khamenei tweeted, accompanying the post with a photo of the procedure.

The vaccine was developed by the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order jointly with Barekat pharma group. COVIran was approved for emergency use on June 14.

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#### Tajikistan Ready to Receive Up to 100,000 Afghan Refugees Amid Rising Violence - Official

DUSHANBE, July 22 (Sputnik) - Tajikistan is ready to accommodate up to 100,000 refugees from Afghanistan who are fleeing increased violence sparked by the offensive by the Taliban (outlawed in Russia as a terrorist organization), Emomali Ibrahimbayev, the deputy head of the Committee of Emergency Situations and Civil Defense, said on Friday.

"Today, it is possible to receive and accommodate about 100,000 refugees from Afghanistan at the military training grounds of the Tajik Ministry of Defense located near the border with Afghanistan," Ibrahimbayev told reporters.

The Central Asian country can accommodate even more refugees, if needed, the official said, adding that Tajikistan, along with international organizations, is currently exploring such possibility.

In July, Tajikistan received more than 1,500 refugees from Afghanistan and provided them with all the necessities, including medical care, shelter and food, the official added. All the refugees have already returned to their homes.

Afghanistan has witnessed a spike in violence as the Taliban stepped up military activities after international troops began withdrawing from the country in May, as part of the US-Taliban agreement signed in Doha in February 2020. Fearing attacks and fleeing clashes, Afghan civilians and military crossed the border into Tajikistan.

On Thursday, Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid told Sputnik the radical movement had established 90% control over Afghanistan's border, including with such neighboring countries as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran.

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Russia to Start Exporting Universal Target-Training System Adjutant in 2022 - Developer

ZHUKOVSKY, Russia, July 22 (Sputnik) - Russia plans to start exporting its universal target-training complex Adjutant, which is used to train air defense systems combat crews, in 2022, Viacheslav Dzirkaln, deputy chief of the Almaz-Antey arms industry company, told Sputnik.

Dzirkaln earlier told Sputnik that four foreign customers are interested in purchasing Adjutant, with contracts signing being "just a matter of time."

"First export deliveries of the Adjutant complex are expected in 2022, first contracts with foreign customers should be signed this year," Dzirkaln said at the MAKS-2021 international air show. Foreign buyers became interested in acquiring the Adjutant complex during the demonstration firing at targets, Almaz-Antey representative specified.

"They liked everything. In addition, I want to note that the system is quite cheap," Dzirkal added. The MAKS-2021 international aviation and space show is taking place in the Moscow region from July 20-25. Sputnik News Agency is an official media partner of the event.

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**CORRECTION - Kremlin on Taliban's Removal From Russia's Banned Organizations' List: No Updates on Issue**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday that there are no updates on the issue of removing the Taliban (outlawed in Russia) from the country's list of banned organizations.

Peskov was asked what is President Vladimir Putin's opinion on the Taliban and whether there are plans to remove the movement from the list of organizations banned in Russia.

"So far, there are no updates on this matter. If there are any, we will inform you. Surely, the Taliban movement is a solid and powerful enough force operating in Afghanistan. Naturally, is



important for us that everything that happens in Afghanistan does not pose a threat to the perimeter of our partners' borders. First of all, Tajikistan, of course," Peskov said.

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**Ex-UN Chief Ban Says COVID-19 Rooted in Climate Change Caused by 'People's Greed'**

CHANGSHA, China, July 22 (Sputnik) - Climate change triggered by "the greed of humanity" is the root cause of the coronavirus pandemic raging across the world, former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said on Friday.

In a video address to an environmental forum in the Chinese city of Changsha, the ex-UN chief expressed confidence that the international community should address the root causes, not the signs of the problem, to avoid such pandemics in the future.

The main reason for the health crisis is climate change, which cannot be addressed without achieving zero CO2 emissions, Ban stated.

The former UN head highlighted the importance for the US, China, Japan, South Korea and the EU — the main sources of greenhouse gas emissions — to deliver on their carbon neutrality goals, adding that the future of next generations depends on it.

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**Kremlin Says No Updates on Russia's Possible Plans to Host Negotiations on Afghanistan**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday that there are no updates on the issue of the possibility to host negotiations on Afghanistan by Russia. Peskov was asked what is President Vladimir Putin's opinion on the Taliban (outlawed in Russia) and whether there are plans to remove the movement from the list of organizations banned in Russia.

"So far, there are no updates on this matter. If there are any, we will inform you. Surely, the Taliban movement is a solid and powerful enough force operating in Afghanistan. Naturally, is important for us that everything that happens in Afghanistan does not pose a threat to the perimeter of our partners' borders. First of all, Tajikistan, of course," Peskov said.

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**Kremlin Explains Why Gazprom Welcomes German Engagement in Effort Related to Gas Transit**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Russia's gas giant Gazprom welcomes Germany's participation in the work related to gas transit through Ukraine because the volume of gas supplies depends on the demand, on Germany's demand in particular, since it is a major consumer, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov explained on Friday.

Earlier this week, Gazprom CEO Alexey Miller said that the company is ready to continue gas transit through Ukraine after 2024, based on economic feasibility and technical condition of the Ukrainian gas transportation system. At the same time, he added that Gazprom sees the Nord Stream 2 as a purely economic project, aimed at ensuring reliability, stability and diversification of gas supplies to the EU market, and reducing gas costs for end consumer due to a shorter route.

"You probably saw that Miller also welcomed engagement of German representatives in the negotiations, since negotiations on the continuation of transit after 2024 are largely related to the decarbonization processes in Europe and the European demand. Germany is the largest gas consumer in Europe, therefore the volume will largely depend on their demand," Peskov told reporters.

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Russia to Fulfill Export Obligations on Sputnik V Vaccine - Kremlin

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Russia will fulfill its export obligations on the Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine, including to Argentina, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday, adding that the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) is carrying out necessary work.

The Argentine La Nacion newspaper has reported that Buenos Aires asked the RDIF to urgently send the doses of the second component of Sputnik V and warned that the contract may be terminated. Argentine officials later said that cooperation with Russia on vaccine deliveries is good and doses of the vaccine's second component have already arrived.

"As for the fulfillment of obligations on foreign markets, including Argentina, they will certainly be fulfilled. There was a delay, and the RDIF is in contact with its partners in order to resolve the inevitable problems that arise," Peskov told reporters.

The spokesman also said that the Kremlin "has always said that the top priority is to meet the vaccination needs of Russians."

"You know that the campaign for universal vaccination has significantly intensified, and the consciousness of citizens is constantly growing, the rate of vaccination is increasing more and more. Therefore, this is an unconditional priority," Peskov added.

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Australia Fines Firm \$3.7Mln for Selling Clothes 'Shielding' Against COVID-19

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Australia's athletic apparel retailer Lorna Jane has been fined 5 million Australian dollars (\$3.7 million) for misleading the public over claims that its clothes allegedly prevent the transmission of viruses, including COVID-19, the competition and consumer commission (ACCC) said on Friday.

"The Federal Court has ordered Lorna Jane Pty Ltd (Lorna Jane), to pay \$5 million in penalties for making false and misleading representations to consumers, and engaging in conduct liable to mislead the public, in connection with the promotion and supply of its 'LJ Shield Activewear,' the ACCC said in a press release.

The local manufacturer admitted that from July 2-23, 2020 — during a surge in infections in Australia — it made knowingly false statements that its anti-virus sportswear had been sprayed with a substance called LJ Shield, which "eliminated," "stopped the spread" and "protected wearers" against pathogens.

Advertisements on the firm's website, stores and on Instagram made the following claims — "Cure for the Spread of COVID-19? Lorna Jane Thinks So" and "LJ SHIELD is a groundbreaking technology that makes transferal of all pathogens to your Activewear (and let's face it, the one we're all thinking about is Covid-19) impossible by eliminating the virus on contact with the fabric."

Last July, the company was fined by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) for selling clothes allegedly protecting against the coronavirus. Back then, the TGA issued three infringement notices to Lorna Jane, with penalties totaling 39,960 Australian dollars. The notices are related to the firm's failure to register goods on the Australian register of therapeutic goods and seek TGA approval prior to making certain claims, as well as a breach of the advertising code.

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Russia Has All Resources to Host 2036 Olympic Games - Sports Minister

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Russia has all the necessary resources to qualify for hosting the 2036 Olympic Games, Sports Minister Oleg Matsytsin told Sputnik.

Kazan has previously expressed a desire to host the Olympics.

"It's too early to talk about it, but I think that Russia will be able to qualify for the 2036 Games. It will be a difficult and responsible decision, but we have all the necessary resources to hold such a large-scale event. I hope that before that Russia will have the opportunity to host other major tournaments: World and European Championships, World Cups. Our country has the potential, the desire of the sports community is also there. Russia has always been and remains the most reliable partner of the Olympic movement," Matsytsin said.

The minister added that if Russian President Vladimir Putin makes a decision on applying to host the Olympics "then the competition for the right to host the Games will be high".



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#### **Moldovan Constitutional Court Recognizes Results of Snap Parliamentary Vote**

CHISINAU, July 22 (Sputnik) - The Moldovan Constitutional Court officially recognized on Friday the results of the snap parliamentary elections, held earlier in July.

The pro-Western Action and Solidarity Party received 52.8% of the vote while the rival bloc of Communists and Socialists came second with 27.17% in the July 11 vote. On July 19, the central election commission officially recognized the results of the elections.

"The Moldovan Constitutional Court rules to confirm the results of the snap parliamentary elections that Moldova held on July 11, 2021, and to recognize the mandates of the parliament members as valid," court chairwoman Domnica Manole announced.

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#### **Lavrov Believes Moscow Format on Afghanistan Most Effective One**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed the belief that the Moscow format on the Afghanistan conflict resolution is the most effective one for conducting peace talks.

"[Moscow] considers the Moscow format — which convened a couple of times and which represents all the Central Asian countries, regardless whether they share a border with Afghanistan or not, and also India, China, Pakistan, Iran, the United States and Russia — the most effective one ... It is representative, capacious and efficient," Lavrov said at an online conference hosted by the United Russia political party.

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#### **Cuba Denies Reports of People Missing After Protests**

MEXICO CITY, July 22 (Sputnik) - Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla has dismissed the credibility of lists of people allegedly missing after recent demonstrations.

On July 11, Cuba saw its largest protests since 1994, fueled by anger over shortages of basic goods. Thousands of people took to the streets to demand "free elections" and the resolution of social issues. According to local media, protests and demonstrations took place in eight Cuban cities, including Havana. In response, government and Communist Party supporters held their countermarches.

"Lists of missing persons have been published. Here I say that they are false and that there is not a single such case," Rodriguez Parrilla told a press conference on Thursday. The minister went on to accuse CNN and Fox News of "systematic and deceitful manipulation." He also urged the US or "any entity in any country" to present a single case of missing persons, promising to refute it with sufficient evidence "within a few hours." The US on Thursday imposed sanctions on Cuba's minister of revolutionary armed forces and the interior ministry's special brigade over the alleged crackdown on the protests. President Joe Biden said the US will continue to hold Havana responsible and the latest round of sanctions is "just the beginning." The American leader had earlier announced other restrictive measures, including banning US citizens from sending money to relatives in Cuba.

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#### Death Toll From Floods in China's Henan Province Reaches 51 - Authorities

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The death toll from the heavy floods in the Chinese province of Henan has risen to 51 people, the regional department of emergencies said on Friday. Previous reports said that 33 people died and eight were missing.

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#### Russia Discussing Air Defense Systems Export With Serbia - Defense Cooperation Agency

ZHUKOVSKY, Russia, July 22 (Sputnik) - Russia is ready to supply Serbia with air defense systems, relevant consultations are ongoing, Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation Director Dmitry Shugaev told Sputnik.

"Various cooperation projects are being considered in consultations with the Serbian side, including the purchase of air defense weapons that are in great demand in the arms market. We are ready to assist Serbia on this track," Shugaev said at the MAKS-2021 international air show. It is too early to say anything about exact results of the consultations, Shugaev added, also qualifying Serbia as an important strategic partner.

Serbia is one of Europe's largest importers of Russian weapons and military equipment. In the recent years, Russia delivered to Serbia 30 modernized T-72MS tanks, 30 BRDM-2 armored vehicles, seven Mi-17 and Mi-35 helicopters, six MiG-29 fighters and a set of Pantsir-S1 missile systems. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said his country would like to have Russia's S-400 but cannot yet afford it.

The MAKS-2021 international aviation and space show is taking place in the Moscow region from July 20-25. Sputnik News Agency is an official media partner of the event.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik)

##### PEGASUS SPYWARE SCANDAL

\* Indian opposition lawmakers held a rally on Friday in front of the Gandhi statue outside parliament to demand a probe into the Pegasus spyware scandal, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

\* All communications technology products from any foreign country need to be checked for potential hardware and software surveillance implants in the wake of the Pegasus scandal, former US National Security Agency Technical Director and whistleblower William Binney told Sputnik.

##### TOKYO OLYMPICS

\* The International Olympic Committee qualified the separation of Ukraine from Crimea by a border on the official website of the Tokyo Olympics as an "unfortunate mistake" of the service provider.

\* Japanese Emperor Naruhito welcomed a number of world leaders and US First Lady Jill Biden at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo ahead of the opening of the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Kyodo news agency reported on Friday.

\* The Organizing Committee of the Tokyo Summer Olympics said on Friday that 19 more people linked to the games were diagnosed with COVID-19, including three of them in the Olympic village.

\* Russian female archer Svetlana Gomboeva, 23, fell unconscious on Friday during the Tokyo Olympics' qualifiers, the Russian Olympic Committee said.

##### WADA-RUSADA DISPUTE

\* The restoration of the Russian Anti-Doping Agency will be a long process, World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) President Witold Banka told Sputnik, emphasizing that the Russian agency should be completely independent of the country's government.

\* WADA has submitted to international sports federations 607 packages with data from the Moscow anti-doping laboratory on possible violations by Russian athletes, Banka told Sputnik.

##### RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

\* The West is trying to undermine Russia's domestic political stability on the eve of the elections, as it is putting forward unsubstantiated accusations related to jailed opposition figure Alexey Navalny and other topics, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday.

\* The West is trying to form a belt of instability around Russia, using Belarus and Moldova in particular, Lavrov said on Friday.

\* CIA Director William Burns in an interview with NPR said that Russia could be behind the so-called Havana syndrome affecting the health of US diplomats in Cuba but there are no definitive conclusions and various possibilities.



#### AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENTS

- \* The Taliban (outlawed in Russia) refute media reports claiming that the movement demands the resignation of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as a precondition for a ceasefire, Mohammad Naeem, the spokesman for the Taliban's political office, told Sputnik.
- \* Over 100 civilians were killed in the Spin Boldak district in Afghanistan's southern province of Kandahar after it was captured by the Taliban, the interior ministry's spokesman, Mirwais Stanekzai, said.
- \* CIA Director William Burns in an interview with NPR said he is troubled by the advances the Taliban movement (banned in Russia) is making in Afghanistan.

#### DEADLY REBEL ATTACK IN CAR

- \* The rebel attack in the Ouham prefecture of the Central African Republic left 13 people dead, the UN Mission in the Central African Republic said.

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#### Four Countries Interested in Russia's Universal Target-Training System Adjutant- Developer

ZHUKOVSKY, Russia, July 22 (Sputnik) - Four foreign customers are interested in purchasing Russia's universal target-training complex Adjutant, which is used to train air defense systems combat crews, Viacheslav Dzirkaln, deputy chief of the Almaz-Antey arms industry company, told Sputnik.

"We are actively marketing the Adjutant complex, four countries are interested in it. There are no contracts yet, but technical and commercial proposals have been submitted, and deals signing is just a matter of time," Dzirkaln said at the MAKS-2021 international air show. Almaz-Antey positions Adjutant in the international arms market as a universal complex that can be used for ensuring training and coordination of combat crews for any air defense systems, including Tor, Buk and S-300.

The MAKS-2021 international aviation and space show is taking place in the Moscow region from July 20-25. Sputnik News Agency is an official media partner of the event.

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#### Rally Against Tokyo Games Staged Near City Hall During Olympic Torch Relay

TOKYO, July 22 (Sputnik) - Opponents of the Olympics have staged a rally near the Tokyo city hall, where the final leg of the Olympic torch relay took place, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Friday.

"The government must allocate this money for fighting the coronavirus, not for the Olympics. We do not need these games," a protester told Sputnik.

Demonstrators held banners with slogans in English in order to make their demands comprehensible for foreign journalists who came to cover the relay. One of the protesters had a poster with the Olympic rings crossed out and the slogan "Global crime against Japan."

Since June, Tokyo has been witnessing a spike in COVID-19 cases. Earlier in July, the authorities declared a state of emergency in the capital.

The severe epidemiological situation caused concerns among Japanese people that the Games would trigger an explosive rise in infections. According to a survey published by the NHK broadcaster earlier in July, 30% of Japanese believe the Olympics should be canceled.

The Tokyo Olympic Games will open on Friday. Around 19,000 athletes will take part in the competitions, which will include 33 disciplines, the biggest in the history of the games.

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#### **Afghan Military Retakes District From Taliban in Herat Province**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The Afghan government forces have liberated the Karokh district from the Taliban (a terror group, banned in Russia) in the western province of Herat, the defense ministry said on Friday.

"ANDSF [the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] and Public Uprising Forces liberated #Karokh district of #Herat province from terrorist TB [the Taliban's] control today. Tens of TB were killed and wounded during operation. Offensive operations have been launched in Herat, and other parts of the Prov[ince] will soon be liberated," spokesman Fawad Aman wrote on Twitter.

Afghanistan is witnessing a spike in violence as international troops began withdrawing from the country. The Taliban have since launched an offensive and overrun large swaths of land.

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#### **Taliban Refute Reports That Movement Demands Ghani's Resignation as Ceasefire Condition**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The Taliban (outlawed in Russia) refute media reports claiming that the movement demands the resignation of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as a precondition for a ceasefire, Mohammad Naeem, the spokesman for the Taliban's political office, told Sputnik.

Earlier in the day, AP reported that the Taliban considers Ghani's resignation and formation of the new government necessary for peace in Afghanistan.

"These statements are not true at all," Naeem said.

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**UK Exempts Food Supply Staff From COVID Quarantine to Avoid Shortages Over 'Pingdemic'**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The UK government exempts food production and supply sector workers from coronavirus-related quarantine in a bid to avoid food shortages as the so-called pingdemic puts pressure on the sector, the Department of Health and Social Care said.

The move comes after the official health app told hundreds of thousands of workers to isolate following contact with someone with COVID-19, causing disruptions and prompting people to panic-buy. A record 618,903 people in England and Wales were "pinged" by the NHS COVID-19 app in the week to July 14, the official data said.

The UK health department revealed late on Thursday a list of 16 sectors, including food production and supply, where workers regardless of vaccination status will not have to self-isolate after coming into close contact with a COVID patient. They will be allowed to take daily tests at work instead.

The list also includes such sectors, as energy, civil nuclear, digital infrastructure, waste, water, veterinary medicines, essential chemicals, essential transport, medicines, medical devices, clinical consumable supplies, emergency services, border control, essential defense outputs, and local government.

The Times reported on Friday that the new rule will apply to workers in 2,000 warehouses and supermarket distribution centers, with up to 10,000 staff expected to qualify for the scheme.

"Over the past day, 23,811 COVID-19 cases were confirmed across 85 Russian regions, including 2,495 cases (10.5%) without clinical symptoms," the center said, adding that the rate of increase fell to 0.39%.

Moscow has the highest number of new cases with 3,425 daily infections, down from 4,287 the day before. The Russian capital was followed by the Moscow region with 1,965 cases, up from 1,835, and St. Petersburg with 1,940 cases, down from 1,943.

The response center reported 795 new deaths linked to the coronavirus, down from 796 the day before, raising the country's total death toll to 152,296.

In the same 24 hours, 22,547 COVID-19 patients were discharged from hospitals across the country, down from 22,660 the day before, bringing the total to 5,450,004.

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**Lavrov Plans to Visit Italy, Austria, Hungary in August**

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday that he plans to visit Italy, Austria and Hungary in August.

"And in Western countries, I have a lot of friends, including among my colleagues. I am invited to certain countries of the European Union. For example, next month I will have such a



structured visit: Hungary, Austria, Italy," Lavrov said at an online conference hosted by the United Russia political party.

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#### West Trying to Create Instability Belt Around Russia - Lavrov

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The West is trying to form a belt of instability around Russia, using Belarus and Moldova in particular, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday. "Naturally, they descend to outright fakes. All this must be taken into account. They are trying to form a belt of instability around us, forcing our closest neighbors, our brotherly peoples to make a choice 'either you are with the West, or you are with the Russian Federation.' They want to master the territory around our country both militarily and economically and to surround us with a sanitary cordon," Lavrov said at an online conference hosted by the United Russia political party.

Exactly this policy was used in Ukraine, and in the recent months, the West tried to "test" color revolution methods in Belarus, with the United States and the EU countries also launching a "geopolitical struggle" for Moldova, Lavrov recalled.

"Now our Western colleagues are trying to expand their presence, including the military one along the perimeter of our borders, including Central Asia and Transcaucasus," Lavrov added.

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#### West Trying to Destabilize Russia's Domestic Political Situation Ahead of Vote - Lavrov

MOSCOW, July 22 (Sputnik) - The West is trying to undermine Russia's domestic political stability on the eve of the elections, as it is putting forward unsubstantiated accusations related to jailed opposition figure Alexey Navalny and other topics, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday.

The campaign ahead of Russia's parliamentary vote is taking place in "difficult external conditions," as Western countries seek exerting an influence on the situation in Russia, the foreign minister said at an online conference, held at a site of the United Russia political party. "Western political strategists make no secret of the fact that they want to undermine domestic political stability. They resort to a wide range of dirty tools and fake information, and put forward unsubstantiated accusations about Navalny and the Malaysian Boeing that crashed over Ukraine in July 2014, about the Skripals and many other things," Lavrov said.

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**Japanese Emperor Receives World Leaders, US First Lady Ahead of Olympics Opening - Reports**

TOKYO, July 22 (Sputnik) - Japanese Emperor Naruhito has welcomed a number of world leaders and US First Lady Jill Biden at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo ahead of the opening of the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Kyodo news agency reported on Friday.

The details of the meetings have not been disclosed yet.

The emperor will deliver a speech during the opening ceremony later on Friday. In total, up to 950 guests are expected to attend the event, including French President Emmanuel Macron.

The Summer Olympics in Tokyo, initially scheduled to take place in 2020, were postponed for a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The event is currently set to last until August 8 with stringent restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the virus, including the ban on spectators on nearly all Olympic venues.

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**Russia's Rostec Sold Over 160 Aircraft Units, Including 58 SSJ100 Planes, at MAKS Air Show**

ZHUKOVSKY, Russia, July 22 (Sputnik) - Enterprises of Russia's Rostec signed agreements for 161 aircraft units, including 58 SSJ100 planes, at the MAKS-2021 international air show, the state corporation said on Friday.

"Enterprises of Rostec state corporation signed agreements for supplies of 161 aircraft units.

Thus, the United Aircraft Corporation will supply 58 Sukhoi Superjet 100 aircraft and 19 regional Il-114-300 aircraft to customers. The Russian Helicopters signed agreements for the supply of 84 helicopters, including Mi-171A3 , Ka-62, Mi-38, Mi-8 and Ansat," Rostec said in a statement.

The MAKS-2021 international aviation and space show is taking place in the Moscow region from July 20-25. Sputnik News Agency is an official media partner of the event.

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**Indian Opposition Parties Rally Outside Parliament Over Pegasus Spyware Scandal**

NEW DELHI, July 22 (Sputnik) - Indian opposition lawmakers held a rally on Friday in front of the Gandhi statue outside parliament to demand a probe into the Pegasus spyware scandal, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

The main opposition Indian National Congress party plans to raise the issue in both chambers of the legislature later today.

Last week, Paris-based Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International obtained a list of over 50,000 phone numbers whose owners might have been targeted by government clients of Israeli cybersecurity firm NSO Group using its Pegasus software. Among the potential targets, there were over 1,000 Indian phone numbers belonging to journalists, businessmen, politicians, including ex-Indian National Congress president Rahul Gandhi.

On Monday, the Indian National Congress requested a probe into the alleged role of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the scandal, accusing him of "treason."

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#### Russia's Rostec Signed Contracts Worth Over \$3.1Bln at MAKS Air Show

ZHUKOVSKY, Russia, July 22 (Sputnik) - Russia's state corporation Rostec signed contracts worth over 230 billion rubles (\$3.1 billion) at the ongoing MAKS-2021 international air show, which exceeds all expectations, Rostec CEO Sergey Chemezov said on Friday.

"The results of the air show exceeded all expectations: our companies signed agreements with partners worth over 230 billion rubles," Chemezov said, as quoted by Rostec.

"Rostec presented over 500 product samples at the air show, including around 50 new products: airplanes, helicopters, UAVs, avionics, engines and much more, including a new Sukhoi tactical aircraft Checkmate," Chemezov added.

The MAKS-2021 international aviation and space show is taking place in the Moscow region from July 20-25. Sputnik News Agency is an official media partner of the event.

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#### Russian Military Equipment Contracted at MAKS Includes Fighters, Attack Helicopters-Rostec

ZHUKOVSKY, Russia, July 22 (Sputnik) - Russia's military equipment contracted at the MAKS-2021 international air show includes Su-30SME fighters and Mi-35M attack helicopters, Rostec state corporation announced on Friday.

"[Russia's state arms exporter] Rosoboronexport signed 13 export contracts for the supply of Russian military equipment with a total worth of over 1 billion euros [\$1.1 billion]. The list includes Su-30SME aircraft, Mi-35M and Mi-17V5 helicopters, Protivnik-E radar system and Verba man-portable air defense system, as well as modern aviation weapons, armored vehicles and automotive vehicles," Rostec told reporters.

The MAKS-2021 international aviation and space show is taking place in the Moscow region from July 20-25. Sputnik News Agency is an official media partner of the event.

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**107-Year-Old Tulsa Massacre Survivor's Wish to Visit Africa Coming True - Organizer**

WASHINGTON, July 22 (Sputnik) - Mother Viola Fletcher, a 107-year-old Black woman who survived the 1921 Tulsa, Oklahoma race massacre, will finally see her dream of visiting Africa fulfilled, Our Black Truth (OBT) Chief Operating Officer and trip organizer, Dr. Toni Luck, told Sputnik.

During a visit to Tulsa in May to participate in the somber centenary observances marking the Tulsa race massacre in the Greenwood district of Oklahoma's capital city, is when Luck learned that one wish on Fletcher's bucket list is to go to Africa.

Fletcher, the oldest living of three remaining survivors of the 1921 massacre, and her brother will be in Ghana for a week in the middle of August for the visit dubbed, "Coming Home: The Journey of a Lifetime."

"I've been going to Africa for 34 years. Ghana is part of an Africa experience that gives you a punch," Luck said. "Ghana is more user friendly than other countries and not as chaotic. So we sold Ghana to Mother Fletcher's grandson. Our Black Truth will oversee the trip and underwrite what we couldn't raise."

Luck said she recalls how painful it was listening to Fletcher's testimony before Congress in mid-May about the massacre.

"She lives everyday with the nightmare of fire, smoke, people being murdered and planes dropping bombs on the Greenwood district. She had 36,500 years of bad memories. We're going to give her some new memories," Luck said. "It's a seven-day visit to Accra, Cape Coast and we may have a durbar in Accra."

Fletcher, the other survivors and descendants of those killed and dispossessed a century ago, have filed a lawsuit seeking reparations for their losses. During her testimony Fletcher said she is seeking justice that she has not seen in her entire life.

Luck said 36 square blocks of Black businesses, homes and Black-owned establishments were burned to ashes by white Tulsa residents who killed more than 300 people, looted and burned more than 1,000 homes, churches, schools and businesses and left more than 10,000 people homeless and displaced.

"It was devastation, yet for many, many years, Tulsa was a national secret. People who survived ran everywhere to save their lives. Mother Fletcher ended up in California and worked in a shipyard during WW II," she said of the May 31, 1921 massacre.

One hundred years later, Luck said, Tulsa and the United States are still reckoning with these examples of its violent, racist history. But Tulsa was not an aberration, she added.

"I have a map between 1890 and 1930 and there were 15 Tulsas all over the US. Every community was highly actualized and thriving," Luck said. "Black people owned homes and businesses in communities that were independent and separate. But there was white rage of the excellence Black people exhibited."



Our Black Truth (OBT) is a social media platform where Africans and African-descended people can communicate with each other without fear of being censored for speaking the truth regarding topics that affect the community.

The election campaign begins today, the commission added.

compliant with the World Anti-Doping Code. RUSADA disagreed with the decision, and the case was transferred to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which published its verdict on December 17, 2020. Russia was prohibited from holding world championships and the Olympic and Paralympic Games for two years. In addition, Russian athletes cannot perform under the national flag at major tournaments.

"We work with them. It depends [on] how quick they fulfill the requirements. It's up to them how will they work with WADA, how they will fulfill all our requirements and the roadmap. I don't want to speculate, I don't want now to say when it's possible. [We should] give the both sides chance to work together," Banka said, noting that restoration will be a long process in any case.

"There are lot of key points in terms of how they should work. But one of the most important issues for us in general is the fact that RUSADA should remain independent, should be free of any interference from the public authorities side. They should be totally operationally independent. This is the core of antidoping policy, and that is what we expect from public authorities in Russia," Banka added.

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**UPDATE - Number of COVID-19 Cases in India Rises by 35,342 Over Past 24 Hours – Health Ministry**

NEW DELHI, July 22 (Sputnik) – India has confirmed 35,342 new cases of the coronavirus over the past 24 hours, with the total number of those infected having reached 31,293,062, the country's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare said on Friday.

The death toll from the disease has reached 419,470 people, with 483 new fatalities being recorded over the past day.

More than 30.46 million people have recovered in India since the start of the outbreak.

A day earlier, the country confirmed 41,383 new coronavirus cases, with 507 fatalities.

India comes second in terms of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, following the United States with more than 34.28 million patients.

The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020. To date, more than 192.53 million people have been infected with the coronavirus worldwide, with over 4.13 million fatalities, according to Johns Hopkins University.

